

1981

## Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992): News Article 26

Channing Gray

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell\\_neh\\_I\\_81](http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_81)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gray, Channing, "Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992): News Article 26" (1981). *Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992)*. Paper 93.

[http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell\\_neh\\_I\\_81/93](http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_81/93)

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

# Disney is a new breed of arts administrator

*A.C. 100 Jan 11, 81*  
She takes a businesslike approach to her job



—Journal-Bulletin Photo by ANDY DICKERMAN

**DIANE DISNEY:** "For arts councils to flourish in times of high inflation, the management approach is essential."

About an hour before Diane Disney learned she had been named director of the state Council on the Arts, she was attending a meeting at Rhode Island College. As she left Roberts Hall, she encountered a young woman with an armful of paintings who was struggling to open a door. She quickly ran to assist her.

Later that afternoon, while sitting at her desk in the arts council's Westminster Mall headquarters, Miss Disney recalled the incident and remarked that it was somehow appropriate. For as head of the agency that will pump nearly \$1 million into the state's cultural life this year, Miss Disney is in a position to open a lot of doors for struggling artists.

By CHANNING GRAY  
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — To some, Diane M. Disney, a local management consultant with few ties to the state's arts community and no training in the arts to speak of, is an unlikely successor to former arts council head Robin Berry, who resigned in October. Miss Disney, who was hired last month at an annual salary of \$24,310, had worked for the agency in the past as a consultant and she served its acting director after Mrs. Berry left. But, otherwise, this is her first job as head of an arts agency.

On the other hand, Miss Disney just might be the right person in the right place at the right time.

A five-minute conversation with Diane Disney, a former journalist who has held top-level jobs in advertising, is kind of like taking a crash course in advanced management principles. She is hard-headed, analytical and talks of transforming her agency into a well-oiled, efficient machine.

In a way, Miss Disney belongs to a new breed of arts administrator, one who has an interest in the arts but realizes that arts councils must be run like any other non-profit organization. In the past, professional artists with little or no management experience were chosen for these jobs, a practice that helped create the impression that arts agencies are somewhat mytheaded when it comes to financial matters.

NOW THAT TREND seems to have reversed itself, a development Miss Disney sees as a needed one, especially if the economy continues to falter and if rumored cuts in federal arts subsidies by the incoming Reagan administration take place. Reagan staffers have said little or nothing about the new administration's policy toward government support of the arts, but there has been speculation in the press that it may partially, if not completely dismantle the National Endowment for the Arts — a source of half the Rhode Island council's budget.

Interviewed recently at a downtown coffee shop, Miss Disney, wearing a chestnut-colored jacket and a blue, print scarf to tie back her auburn hair, discussed the future of her agency.

"For arts councils to flourish in times of high inflation, especially when some people do not understand how vital the arts can be to someone's life, the management approach is essential," Miss Disney said, chopping at the tabletop with her hands to emphasize her point.

"If inflation continues, resources will shrink and the competition for those resources are going to be increasing. The arts council, like other agencies, will have to be far more creative in its search for capital."

BORN IN Louisville, Ky., Miss Disney, who is in her 30s, single and lives on the city's East Side, worked in the late '60s for the Interpublic Group of Companies, a New York-based advertising conglomerate as a sort of go-between for the corporate and creative ends of the business. She moved to Rhode Island about 10 years ago and has for the past four years run her own consulting business, Disney Lightfoot Lee Ltd.

She holds graduate degrees from Duke, in English and education, and from the University of Rhode Island, where she got a business administration degree. While she was an undergraduate at Stetson University in Florida — where she studied Russian, among other subjects — Miss Disney worked as a freelancer for the wire services, reporting on sports events.

She received the National Volunteer Activist Award in 1978, and is in *Who's Who in American Women* and *Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities*.

Rhode Island's arts council, established in 1967 to develop a variety of educational and community programs, as well as dole out badly needed operating dollars to local cultural groups, has for much of its history been viewed as a maverick among state agencies. It has often dabbled, its critics say, in welfare-type programs and it has frequently been at odds with state bureaucrats who have been put off by the agency's head-in-the-clouds attitude.

Miss Disney said emphatically, though, that she will not permit the agency to operate this way.

"ALL ORGANIZATIONS go through certain stages," she said by way of an analogy. "First, there is the pioneer phase, where all kinds of new ground is broken. Then there is the phase where the settlers come in and fix the place up. And finally, the developers come in and make the place livable."

"We've gone through the first two phases, and now, in order for the arts council to be taken seriously, we must behave like a responsible, professional organization. People will forgive a three-year-old or a five-year-old things they will not forgive an adolescent for, and that happens to organizations as well as people."

Asked whether she belongs to the populist or elitist camp, Miss Disney referred to herself as "an enabler."

"The arts council does not do art, it allows others to do art and we must focus on that enabling function."

"The council doesn't put on festivals, it allows others to put on festivals. And the better we are at enabling, the more festivals there will be."

WHAT LITTLE TIME is left at the end of Miss Disney's often long work day is devoted to tennis and volunteer work for more than a dozen civic organizations, including the United Way; the Samari-

tans, the suicide-prevention group; the Urban League; Volunteers in Action and SER, the career-development program for Hispanic youth.

"It's just part of my life," she says referring to her volunteer work. "It's something I feel I should do. If I believe in a cause or believe in an issue, I feel I should do something about it. If I don't, then it's not my issue, I don't have the right to complain about it."

A couple of years ago, Miss Disney made news when, at an annual meeting of the United Way — normally serene affairs — she read a two-page position paper urging the recruitment of more women and minorities for the agency's allocation committees. The incident resulted in the formation of a minority task force the following year.

"I can't say it was the most comfortable thing I ever did," she said half-jokingly, "but I felt strongly about broadening the base of the people who made the decisions. These are public funds being collected from everyone and spent for everyone. And everyone should have a say in that process."

TO SOME EXTENT, Miss Disney hopes to apply this same philosophy to the operation of the arts council, not so much in the recruitment of minorities, but in opening up the agency to the broadest cross-section of the public.

There are, for example, many part-time positions available at the council, she said, as well as opportunities for artists to serve on the agency's panels, volunteer groups that recommend to the council's 12-member board which grant proposals should receive funding.

"I want to make sure there is some mechanism to review everybody that would like to work for the council in our programs," she said. "There are too many people interested in doing this to rely on who knows who, or anything else. We have to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to be included."

"Quite simply," she said, "I want to professionalize the process."